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ABSTRACT

Preliminary to a larger research project on Mexican American attitudes, this report focused on the extent to which feelings of alienation are present in the barrios of 5 eastern New Mexico population centers. The feelings of alienation were analyzed by the degree of powerlessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, and isolation expressed or implied. The barrio residents were interviewed by Mexican American college students. Interviews were taped in Spanish. Interviews revealed persistent and recurring themes of discrimination, futility, stereotyping by the larger system, and the bewilderment and isolation of the Spanish speaking children in Anglo dominated schools. The findings supported the assertion that many barrio residents feel powerless to do much about a felt lack of social mobility and economic opportunity and exhibit a degree of confusion about the expectations of the larger society. (NQ)

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ALIENATION IN THE BARRIO:

EASTERN NEW MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

Alienation in the Barrio: Eastern New Mexico

This is a preliminary report on a larger research project on Mexican American attitudes and focuses on the extent to which feelings of alienation, as defined in terms of powerlessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, and isolation, are present in the barrios of five of the larger population centers of eastern New Mexico. Interviews were tape recorded in the barrios in Spanish by Mexican American college students and reveal attitudes consistent with the patterns of grievances encountered in such large scale investigations as that undertaken by the Mexican American Affairs commission in 1967 in El Paso. Results are not held to be conclusive but do support the assertion that many of the barrio residents feel powerless to do much about a felt lack of social mobility and economic opportunity and exhibit a degree of confusion about the expectations of the larger society.

ALIENATION IN THE BARRIO:
EASTERN NEW MEXICO

In part, this paper addresses itself in a preliminary way to the need for a "voice from the barrio"--a need frequently noted as unfulfilled in the existing literature on the Mexican Americans.[1] In part it is also a progress report on a larger research project designed to elicit and analyze various social attitudes of residents of the barrios of five of the larger, predominately Anglo, population centers of Eastern New Mexico. Such comment, it is hoped, will provide insight into the way in which this particular segment of the Mexican American population views the social system in which it lives and, more particularly, into the manner in which it sees the educational system in which it frequently does not succeed.[2] Presumably, information of this sort will be of value to educators and other social planners. The tape recorded material on which this paper is based was collected by Mexican American college students. For the most part the interviews were conducted in Spanish and in barrios in which the students were well acquainted. The problems of articulation of feeling and of gaining confidence were thus felt to have been minimized.

Unquestionably, the most difficult problem in the classification and analysis of our largely unstructured

interviews was to provide some type of conceptual framework which would help to identify any recurrent and persistent points of view reflecting deeply held attitudes, values, and beliefs. Hypotheses which seek to explain and interpret the status of Mexican Americans in the social system in terms of present time orientation, a devaluation of education and work, a non-material view of success, an adherence to a traditional view of life, and similar generalized viewpoints are readily available.[3] As a possible means of analysis in our study, however, these explanations were rejected as a priori since, while undoubtedly having a degree of validity for an older and largely bygone period in the rural areas of the Southwest, they suggest beforehand their unerring applicability to the "eastside" New Mexico barrio which is not the isolated rural northern New Mexico community in which many of the early studies which generated these hypotheses were made. In order to avoid the commitment implicit in such an approach, therefore, we have found it more advantageous to our purpose to handle the task of analysis in terms of concepts identifiable in the interviews.

Our interview schedule provided part of the classificatory scheme. General questions on the felt adequacy and relevance of the school, the role of the family in the education of the young, the value of education, and similar

areas of concern yielded a pattern of response that was readily identifiable. But a frequency listing of other views expressed explicitly and implicitly was also fruitful. The types of comment outside our schedule which most persistently recurred dealt with such concerns as discrimination in the school and community, teacher attitudes toward the Mexican American, stereotyping by and of Anglos, the socio-economic opportunities and status of the barrio family, and problems deriving from conflicting role and cultural considerations.

The larger research project of which this report is a part will, of course, deal more exhaustively with each of these concerns if the continuing collection of data validates their persistence as major areas for investigation. For the purposes of this interim report, however, it was felt that a broader, more inclusive conceptual approach which would enable us to summarize our progress to date would be more useful. For this reason it was decided that the concept of "alienation" was of special interest since its central theme of estrangement, either from the social system or from self, is encountered throughout our interviews. Accordingly, our analysis focuses on what frequently are identified as alternative and supplementary meanings of the alienation phenomena: powerlessness--or a feeling that one is powerless to

control the circumstances affecting one's future; normlessness--experienced here a sense of confusion about goal expectations and the seemingly inconsistent behavior patterns needed to achieve them; self-estrangement--especially as it related to the intrinsic meaningfulness and relevance of school and work; and isolation--evidenced by a questioning of and bewilderment about the values and aims of the larger social system and the school.[4] These factors are all present to a considerable extent in our data.

This first report on our research is thus a report on the degree of alienation from school, society, and self, expressed and implied, in some of the principal barrios of eastern New Mexico. It does not claim to exhaust the feelings of barrio residents in this geographic area, nor does it claim to represent the attitudes of the middle class Mexican American of either the eastern portion of the state or elsewhere in New Mexico. It does, however, on the basis of many hours of taped interviews and many pages of transcript, maintain its representativeness of the felt needs and concerns of the majority of the residents in the barrios involved who tend to be economically depressed, lacking in social mobility, apprehensive of past and future, and in varying degrees of conflict in terms of culture, identity, and role. As indicated, the quotations cited

are in translation and are typical of a pattern of sentiment most frequently encountered in our interviews, hence no effort has been made to reproduce all of the comment offered in a given area of concern.

Powerlessness

One of the most persistently recurring themes in our interviews is a feeling of powerlessness to really do much about one's situation in life. Representative is this comment, accusatory, yet self-critical:

> All the Mexicano knows how to do is work like a burro. . . they send him out to dig ditches. . . the jobs that are the hardest. They don't give them an opportunity. And then we ourselves are at fault because we don't have the education. You can stay year after year at a job and when it comes time for a promotion they give it to the gabacho. . .[5]

The speaker is a married woman in a low income bracket with a family of six and obviously has little hope of seeing their condition improved either through their own ambition or by outside assistance. This sentiment is echoed by another resident of the same barrio who apparently only can hope that there is some point in having her children finish high school:

> . . . they don't give you a chance. They say there are a lot of opportunities and you go ask for them. . . and they send you somewhere else. . . just send you around and around.
>
> My brothers have graduated from school and they have been looking for jobs and haven't been able to find anything. . . just in the fields. That's the only place. So, my kids, I don't know for them. But I'd still go ahead with the education and wish that someday they'd find a good job.

But for many of the barrio poor it is not enough just to be in school since they frequently see themselves as helpless in a system where they are at the mercy of uncomprehending and insensitive Anglo teachers, and lacking in identity:

> The teachers in the school, you know, don't like the Mexicanos. . . they tell them not to speak Spanish because they themselves don't know it. . . and ever if the Chicano doesn't know how to talk in English.
>
> All they want to do is get the Chicano out of school.

A most frequent complaint is that of always having to accept the role of the guilty:

> As soon as you go to school they call you troublemaker at first sight. . . that's the way they have us--you know, as you say, "stereotyped."

And in another barrio the feeling was similar:

> They always put the blame on the Mexicano and always kick him out of school. . . taking away every right the child has. One of my kids lacked only three months of finishing school and they ran him out because he wouldn't get a haircut. When we went to the graduation we saw a gringo sitting there and if they hadn't said his name we wouldn't have known whether he was a man or whether he was a woman.

Normlessness

There is further evidence in our interviews of a sense of confusion on the part of many barrio residents with respect to the inconsistency of societal goal expectations and behavior patterns needed to achieve them. This feeling is most evident with respect to the perceived performance and goals of the schools as these affect the children of the barrio. Although implied more than articulated, there is a sustained thread of comment on the seeming disparity of public and private goals.

One student who learned the "system" states:

> There was this boy who was caught cheating--a gabacho--they took him out of class and when he came back he was laughing. He told me later that the coach had told him. . . he would come out passing. So I went out for football and so far I'm keeping my grades.

Particularly convincing are the objections to the procedures and organization of many of the schools in dealing with the Spanish-speaking. Despite their statements of democratic philosophy, many teachers and administrators apparently belie these by actions which suggest a considerable lack of sensitivity to the economic, social, and psychological context in which the student exists, substituting instead a stereotyped image of the Mexican American student as a basis for dealing with him educationally. A high school student, apparently a potential drop out, provides this viewpoint:

> A lot of the Mexicanos here are kind of poor. . . and they can't afford to go to school full time and help the parents. So most of the time they drop out completely. And if they do get a job and keep going to school it turns out to be too hard to go to school and go to work because the jobs they got around here for the

> Mexicano are like washing dishes and going to work in the fields.
>
> A lot of gringos go full time to school. They don't have to worry about having to help the family, so they go in with open minds where the Mexicano goes with his head full of problems. The teachers, you know, are not taking all this into consideration. Right away they throw him into another class at a lower level. They already got me with the tontitos.[6]

The statement is more than a rationalization. It is also a comment on social justice, a question about equality of opportunity modified by economic and social factors and by what is seen as a system oblivious to some of the most basic problems of many of its members. The sense of alienation is evident. The social norms are recognized, but seen as meaningless. The attitudes expressed in the barrio are hardly those officially espoused by the school and society, yet there is reason to believe that the school contributed to their formation by the inconsistency between stated purposes and the means of attainment; that is, between norms and the official actions which frequently contradict the statements of high social purpose.

Self-estrangement and Isolation

The degree of alienation of the people in our sample is further evidenced by the estrangement from school and work implicit in the drop out statistics and job mobility of many of the interviewees. For the most part our respondents were school drop outs and represented varying degrees of employability and employment. Satisfaction deriving from educational and work experiences is nowhere expressed. While there is a verbal recognition of the value of education as a means to "get ahead" in the system economically, there is also a sense of futility and frustration when the availability of opportunities is mentioned. As noted, there is the persistent reference to the meniality of available work and an accompanying sense of humiliation. There is also a strongly felt disillusionment with an educational and social system which appear to serve only the dominant group.

The sense of estrangement and isolation which we encountered was also seen by some as the result of different, and perhaps traditional, values and expectations on the part of <u>other</u> families in the barrio. This alleged absence of responsibility was not infrequently emphasized:

> They shouldn't let teenagers quit school. You know, like telling them: 'You are already old enough to help me work.'

> The parents. . . don't give the child encouragement. The father just goes off to work in the morning and comes back in the evening and thinks that he has fulfilled his obligation. They don't give them advice. This might be because the parents themselves did not go to school. . . I think the parents should give them consejos.

The sense of isolation is also personal:

> When one's in a lower grade, Chicano, gabacho, or whatever, all play together and hang around together. But when you get to be in about the ninth grade people start realizing the difference. The gabacho just keeps more to himself and the Chicano in turn keeps more to himself. In the activities that I was involved in I more or less had to go with my own raza. . . the society the way we got it. . . the majority doesn't even know you exist.

A high school student, after his first exposure to a recently instituted course in Mexican American culture, apparently achieves some type of racial identity for the first time along with a sense of pride and dignity:

> We're taking these course now. . . which is good. That way we'll know where we came from.

Like I never was aware that we were part Indian. I thought we were just plain Mexican, or Spaniards. But now we realize that we're a mixture, that we came out of a great civilization that hardly anybody knows here in town. I go out and talk about it and they don't believe me. They want to see books--especially the old folks.

Summary

An effort has been made to summarize our research to date on some of the attitudes toward school and society generally held by the residents of five of the principal barrios of eastern New Mexico. Our tape recorded interviews were analyzed in terms of the degree of powerlessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, and isolation expressed or implied as evidence of a pattern of alienation. There are the persistent and recurring themes of being discriminated against, of futility, and of being the stereotyped victims of the larger system; there is also the bewilderment and isolation of many of the Spanish-speaking children in the Anglo dominated school. No attempt was made to report on all the data collected as part of our larger research project, but our findings thus far are consistent with the type of grievances uncovered more formally during the

Cabinet Committee Hearings on Mexican American Affairs in 1967 in El Paso.[7] Here, also, concerns about the sincerity, adequacy, meaningfulness, and relevance of governmental agencies and other social institutions were a principal part of the testimony. The Hearings likewise provided evidence of strong feelings of mistrust, discrimination, and lack of educational and economic opportunities similar to those reported in our interviews. Further, our data does not support some of the previously noted hypotheses which are frequently advanced as explanation of Mexican American social and economic status. The value of education, for example, is repeatedly stressed throughout our interviews as a means of betterment of self and race, although there is some confusion about its apparent relevance and availability.

Not all our data reflects a totally negative type of comment on the social and educational systems. The role of the family and individual responsibility are frequently emphasized. But, typically, the response obtained reflects what we judge to be at this point a widespread sense of alienation throughout the barrios surveyed. A sense of powerlessness to break out of what Oscar Lewis defined as the "culture of poverty" is evident, as are feelings of confusion about social purpose and the means for its attainment either within the system or individually.

Our report to this point is not held to be conclusive. We speak with certainty only to the extent that there is a definite pattern of grievance and a sense of alienation in the barrio. We must rely on a continuing research effort to enable us to provide increasingly detailed information and recommendations.

FOOTNOTES

1. See for example, Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, Ralph C. Guzman, The Mexican-American People (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 588: "No area needs more research and thought than the relationship between Mexican Americans and social institutions. . . /Including/ the schools and colleges."
   See also Stan Steiner, La Raza: The Mexican Americans (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 404, where he notes that almost nowhere is there "a voice from the barrio."
   And Oscar Lewis, La Vida (New York: Random House, 1966), preface, in which he stresses the value of the tape recorder method in giving "a voice to people who are rarely heard" and "an inside view to a style of life. . . which is largely unknown, ignored, or inaccessible to most middle class readers."
2. There are numerous works documenting the low educational level and high dropout rate of people of Spanish surname. The principal source of these statistics is the 1960 U. S. Bureau of Census reports.
3. Grebler, Moore, Guzman, op. cit., p. 158, and Joan W. Moore, Mexican Americans: Problems and Prospects (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1967), pp. 43-44, both delineate and comment on types of hypotheses usually advanced.

4. For a detailed discussion on the meaning of the concept of alienation which incorporates these alternative meanings, see Melvin Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation," American Sociological Review, XXIV (1959), 783-91.
5. gabacho-- as used here and generally in New Mexico the word is pejorative and is applied to any Anglo.
6. tontitos-- fools.
7. Grebler, Moore, Guzman, op. cit., pp. 590-593.